

Stefansson Visits Race Long Shunned as Killers of Strangers



Movie Man in the Arctic.

Dreaded Natives Hospitable, Though Spartans as Parents; and Many Babies Die

Here Mr. Stefansson tells the story of his sledge journey eastward over the sea ice after parting from his only white companion, Dr. R. M. Anderson, at Cape Parry on Continental North America. For twenty-two days he went into the unknown frozen east, accompanied only by two Eskimo men, Natusiak and Tannamir, and an Eskimo woman, Pannigabuk, who was invaluable for keeping camp and making and repairing skin garments.

By VILHJALMUR STEFANSSON.

ALTHOUGH mere fractions of time such as minutes seldom are of enough value with us in the North to waste ink in recording them, I have set down in my diary that it was 1:45 in the afternoon of April 21 when we finally made our long planned start from our winter base on Langton Bay at Cape Parry to penetrate to Coronation Gulf.

At last we were fairly started for the unknown, but no one except myself was very enthusiastic over the enterprise. The reluctance of my people was due in part only (and in less part) to their fear of finding the unknown country gameless. They feared to find it inhabited by a barbarous and blood-thirsty race of which the Baillie Islands Eskimo had been telling us grotesque tales. These dreaded people were the Nagykutgmuit, "the people of the caribou antler," who lived far to the east and who used to come in semi-hostile contact with their ancestors long ago.

"These people bear the name of the caribou antler," they had told us, "because of a peculiar custom. When a woman becomes of marriageable age she is made to take her place in an open space and the men who want wives form around her in a circle, each armed with the antler of a large bull caribou. The word is given, and they all rush at her, each trying to hook her toward him with the antler. Often the woman is killed in the scrimmage. If one succeeds in getting her alive he takes her for a wife."

Many Have No Wives.

"As strength and skill are the main requirements for success, some of the Nagykutgmuit have the Spartan many wives, while most of them have none. Because so many women are killed in this way there are twice as many men as women among them. We know many stories of which this is one, to show what queer people these Easterners are. They also kill all strangers."

That was the way all stories of the Easterners ended. Like Cato's delenda Carthago, "they kill all strangers" were the unvarying words that finished every discussion of the Nagykutgmuit by the Baillie Islanders.

No matter how fabulous a story sounds, there is usually a basis of fact. When we at last got to these Easterners we found that the kernel of truth consisted in the fewness of women as compared with men, but this had nothing to do with caribou antlers. It was because they practise the Spartan custom of exposing newborn children, and especially female children, with the result that women among them are much fewer than men.

When we made our start for the East we were in many respects poorly

equipped for spending a year away from any possible source of supplies other than those which the Arctic lands themselves can furnish. I had counted on having good dogs, but now the good dogs were dead. I had counted on Dr. Anderson's company, but necessity (chiefly lack of ammunition) had dictated that he go west for supplies, and that I depend on Eskimo companions alone. I had counted on a silk tent and other light equipment for summer use, and only the lightest and most powerful rifles and high power ammunition, but during one of our winter periods of food shortage I had been compelled to abandon many of these things.

Instead of the ten pound silk tent, I had to take a forty-pound canvas one, old and full of holes. I had only 200 rounds for my Mannlicher-Schoenauer 6.5 mm. rifle, and had to piece out with heavier and less powerful black powder rifles and ammunition. In all we had four rifles of three different calibers, and a total of 950 rounds of three kinds of ammunition, when the right thing obviously is to have but one kind of rifle and ammunition. Had one of our rifles broken we should have had to throw away the ammunition suited to that gun.

Therefore, my three Eskimo felt expressed, and I felt tried to refrain from expressing it, that we had embarked on a serious venture.

Living on the Country.

We started with about two weeks' provisions. These were neither here nor there as provisions for a year's exploration. We would have been quite as well off had we started with only two days' supplies. From the very outset it was incumbent on us to provide each day food for that day's journey. In 15 years, was a cheerful, and companionable sort of fellow, but without initiative and (like many of his countrymen nowadays) not in the best of health.

Our general plan was that the three Eskimo took care of the sled, one in one shot, and Tannamir a big fat grizzly bear. In four shots we had grizzly for several weeks if we had stayed there Eskimo fashion to eat it up. Travelling as we were, heavily loaded through rough ice, we could not take along more than a hundred pounds of meat.

Although the Eskimo frequently killed an animal if it happened on one along the line of march their chief business was getting the sled load many miles ahead as convenient dur-

ing the day, which seldom was over fifteen miles in a working day averaging perhaps eight hours. We were in no hurry, for we had no particular distance to go and no reason to hasten back, but expected to spend the summer wherever it overtook us, and the winter similarly in its turn.

I took upon myself the main burden of the food providing. I had to strike inland about five miles in the morning before the Eskimo broke camp, going rapidly eastward along the coast. With my snowshoes I made rapid progress compared with that of the sled along the coast, unless I happened on caribou.

They were scarce, and I had secured none when we were stopped by a blizzard five days out.

As a matter of fact what my Eskimo really dreaded was not so much hunger as the possibility of success in the quest of the dreaded "Nagykutgmuit" who took wives to them with the antlers of bull caribou.

Caribou in a Blizzard.

Generally it is only in times of extreme need that one hunts caribou in a blizzard—not that nine-tenths of the Arctic blizzards merely hold a healthy man indoors, but merely because the drifting snow diminishes many times your chance of finding game.

If you do find caribou, however, the stronger the gale the better your chance of a close approach, for though these animals are doubly watchful in foggy weather they seem to relax in a blizzard.

I felt that I must kill some for the moral effect it would have on my party: for if there was abundant food they would have to fall back on their fear of the Nagykutgmuit, and this they were a bit ashamed of doing, even among themselves. So I went out and after a short hunt found a band of seven cows and young bulls about five miles inland. I came upon them quite unobserved, but saw while the other two waited at the sled, covered a lunch if it was near midday, or made camp if night was approaching.

If by camp time no game had been seen the woman Pannigabuk would stay by the camp to cook supper, while the two men went off in different directions to hunt.

The land showed nothing but a white wolf or arctic fox now and then. Pannigabuk there were, but they are too small game for a party of four that is going to go a year on 950 rounds of ammunition. The foxes too were beneath our notice, though their meat is excellent; but a wolf that came within 200 yards seldom got by me, for a fat one weighs 100 pounds, and all of us preferred them at this season to caribou, except Pannigabuk, who would not taste the meat because it is taboo to her people.

A Yellow Spot on the Ice.

This day the wolves did not come near, and the first hopeful thing I saw was a yellow spot on the sea ice about three miles off. After watching it for five minutes or so I was still unable to determine whether or not the spot was yellow ice or something else than ice. Now and then I looked elsewhere, for a caribou or grizzly bear may at any time come out from behind a hill, a polar bear from behind a cake of ice, or a seal out of his hole.

After sweeping the entire circle of the horizon perhaps for the sixth time I noticed that the yellow spot had disappeared—it was there, there was a polar bear that had been lying down. After sleeping too long in one position he had stood up and lain down again behind an ice cake.

A moment after noting this I was running as hard as I could in the direction of the bear, for there was no telling how soon he would start travelling or how fast he would go.

When I got to the neighborhood of the animal according to my calculations, I climbed an especially high ridge and spent longer time than usual sweeping the surrounding with the glasses and studying individual ice cakes and ridges with the hope of recognizing some of those I had seen from the mountains to be in the neighborhood of my bear, but everything looked different on near approach and I failed to locate myself to my own satisfaction.

My rifle was buckled in its case slung across my back, and I was cautiously clambering down the far side of a pressure ridge, when I heard behind me a noise like the spitting of a cat or the hiss of a goose. I looked back and saw, about twenty feet away and almost above me, a polar bear.

The Polar Bear's Error.

Had he come the remaining twenty feet as quietly and quickly as a bear can, the literary value of the incident would have been lost forever; for, as the Greek fable points out, a lion does not write a book. From his eye and attitude, as well as the story his trail told afterward, there was no doubting his intentions: the bear was merely his way of saying, "Watch me do it!" Or at least that is how I interpreted it; possibly the motive was rivalry, and the hiss was his way of saying "Garde!" Whichever it was, it was the fatal mistake of a game played well to that point; for no animal on earth can

afford to give warning to a man with a rifle. And why should he? Has a hunter ever played fair with one of them?

Afterward the snow told plainly the short—and for one of the participants, tragic—story. I had underestimated the bear's distance from shore, and had passed the spot where he lay, going a hundred yards or two to windward, on scouting me he had come up the wind to my trail, and had followed it, walking about ten paces to leeward of it, apparently following my tracks by smelling them from a distance. I had not seen his approach because it had not occurred to me to look back over my own trail.

Signs of Unknown Men.

On May 9, nineteen days out from Langton Bay, we came upon signs that made our hearts beat faster. It was at Point Wise, where the open sea begins to narrow into Dolphin and Union straits, which are between the mainland and the mountainous shores of Victoria Island. The beach was strewn with pieces of drift wood, and on one we found marks of recent chippings with a dull adze. A search of the beach for half a mile each way revealed numerous similar chippings. Evidently the men who had made them had been testing the pieces of wood to see if they were sound enough for sleds or other things they wished to make.

The night after this discovery we did not sleep much. The Eskimo were more excited than I was, apparently, and far into the morning they talked and speculated on the meaning of the signs. Had we come upon traces of the Nagykutgmuit "who kill all strangers?"

Fortunately enough, my long entertained fear that traces of people would cause a panic in my party was not realized. In spite of all their talk, and in spite of the fact that they were seriously afraid, the curiosity as to what these strange people would prove to be like—in the spirit of adventure, which seldom crops but in an Eskimo—was far stronger than their fears. We were therefore to start the next morning, and soon out on the road.

Evidence on the Trail.

All that day we found along the beach comparatively fresh traces of people, chiefly shavings and chips. None was of the present winter, though some seemed to be of the previous summer; but next morning, just east of Point Young, we found human footprints in the trusted snow and sled tracks that were not over three months old. That day at Cape Bexley we came upon a deserted village of over fifty snow houses. Their inhabitants had apparently left them about midwinter, and it was, now May 12.

Around but three months untraveled trail led north from this village site across the ice toward Victoria Island. I had intended to continue east along

the mainland into Coronation Gulf, but decided to make an attempt to find the people of the deserted village. We would leave most of our gear on shore with Pannigabuk to take care of it, while the two men and myself took the trail across the ice.

This was according to Eskimo etiquette. On approach to the country of strange or distrustful people non-combatants are left behind and only the able men of the party advance to a cautious parley. The Mackenzie River man, Tannamir, was frightened enough to let his pride go by the board, and to ask that he too might stay on shore at the camp.

Natusiak and I prepared to start alone with a light sled, but at the last moment Tannamir decided to go with us, as the Nagykutgmuit were likely in our absence to discover our camp, surprise it by night and kill him while he slept.

Natusiak was much the coolest of the three Eskimos. If he was afraid to be left alone on shore she did not show it. She merely said that she might get homesick if we were gone more than three or four days. We left her cheerfully engaged in the mending of our worn footgear and at 2:30 P. M. May 12 we took the old trail across the plain trail northward into the rough sea ice.

Chasing a Migratory Community.

It was only near shore that the ice was rough, and with our light sled we made good progress. We made about five miles per hour and inside of two hours we arrived at another deserted village, about a month more recent than the one found at Cape Bexley. We were, therefore, on the trail not of a travelling party but of a migratory community.

As we understood dimly then, and know definitely now, each village on such a trail should be about ten miles from the next preceding, and should be about a month more recent. The explanation is simple. The village of a people who hunt seal in level "bay" ice is about five miles; the inhabitants of a shore village can hunt through only half a circle of the same radius, for the other half of the circle will be on land. By the aid of their dogs the Eskimo find the breathing holes of the seals underneath the snow that hides them, and spear the animals as they rise for air. In a month or so the hunters of a single village will have killed all the seals within a radius of about five miles; they must then move camp about ten miles, so that a five mile circle around their next camp shall be tangent to the five mile circle about their last one.

If the circles overlapped there would be that much waste territory within the new circle of activities. If, then,

"Blond Eskimo" Watching Approach of Stefansson.

Explorer Tells How He Gained First Clue Leading to His Discovery of "Blond Eskimo"

you are following such a trail and come to a village about four months old you will expect to find the people who made it not more than forty miles off.

The Unknown Men at Last.

In the present case our task was simplified by the fact that the group we were following had not moved straight ahead north, but had made their fourth camp west of the second. Standing on the roofs of the houses of the second camp we could see three seal hunters a few miles to the west, each sitting on his block of snow by a seal hole waiting for the animal to rise. The seal hunters and their camp were up the wind and our dogs scented them. As we bore swiftly down upon the nearest of the sealers the dogs showed enthusiasm and anticipation as keen as mine—keen by a great deal than did my Eskimo. Since the hunter was separated from his fellow hunters by a full half mile I thought he would probably be frightened if all of us were to rush up to him at the top speed of our dogs. We therefore stopped our sled several hundred yards away.

Tannamir had become braver now, for the lone stranger did not look formidable sitting stooped forward as he was on his block of snow beside the seal hole; so he actually volunteered to act as ambassador, saying that the Mackenzie dialect (his own) was probably nearer the strange tongue than Natusiak's. This seemed likely, so I told him to go ahead. The sealer sat motionless as Tannamir approached him. I watched him through my glasses and saw that he held his face steadily as if watching the seal hole, but that he raised his eyes every second or two to the strange figure of the man approaching. He was evidently tensely ready for action.

Tannamir by now was thoroughly over his fears and would have walked right up to the sealer, but when no word came he began to grow excited and volubly to assure the sealer that he and all of us were friendly and harmless, men of excellent character and intentions.

Mistaken for Spirits.

I was of course too far away to hear, but Tannamir told me afterward that on the instant of jumping up the sealer began a monotonous noise which is not a chant nor is it words—it is merely an effort to ward off dimness, for if a man who is in the presence of a spirit does not make at least one sound each time he draws his breath he will be stricken permanently dumb. This belief is common to both the Alaska and Coronation Gulf Eskimo.

For several minutes Tannamir talked excitedly, and the sealer kept up the monotonous noise, quite unable to realize apparently that he was being spoken to in human speech. It did not occur to him for a long time, he told us afterward, that we might be something other than spirits, for our dogs and dog harness, our sleds and clothes were such as he had never seen in all his wanderings. Besides, we had not on approaching used the peace sign of his people, which is holding the hands out to show that one does not carry a knife.

The man finally began to listen and then to answer. The dialects kept up to differ about as much as Norwegian does from Swedish or Spanish from Portuguese. After Tannamir had made him understand that we were of good intent and character and had showed by lifting his own coat that he had no knife, the sealer approached him continuously and felt of him partly (as he told us later) to assure himself that he was not a spirit and partly to see if there were not a knife hidden somewhere under his clothes.

After a careful examination and some further parley he told Tannamir to tell us that day two would proceed home to the village and Natusiak and I might follow as far behind as we were now; when they got to the village we were to remain out-

side it till the people could be informed that we were visitors with friendly intentions.

As we proceeded toward the village other seal hunters gradually converged toward us from all over the neighboring four or five square miles of ice and blond Tannamir and his companion, who walked about 200 yards ahead. As each of these was armed with a long knife and a seal spear it may be imagined that the never very brave Tannamir was pretty thoroughly frightened.

When we approached the village every man, woman and child was out-doors waiting for us excitedly, for they could tell from afar that we were no ordinary visitors. The man whom we first approached—who that day acquired a local prominence which still distinguishes him above his fellows—explained to an eagerly silent crowd that we were friends from a distance who had come without evil intent and, immediately the whole crowd (about forty) came running toward us.

Introduced Themselves Eagerly.

As each came up he would say: "I am So-and-so. I am well disposed. I have no knife. Who are you?" After being told our names in return and being assured that we were friendly and that our knives were packed away in the sled and not hidden under our clothing, each would stand aside for the next to present himself. Sometimes a man would present his wife, or a woman her husband, according to which came up first. The women were in more hurry to be presented than were the men, for they must, they said, go right back to their homes to cook us something to eat.

The men asked us whether we preferred to have our camp right in their village or a little outside of it. We agreed it would be better to camp about 200 yards from the other houses, to keep our dogs from fighting with theirs. Immediately half a dozen small boys came home to get their fathers' snow knives and house building mittens.

Well Bred Savages.

We were not allowed to touch a hand to anything in camp-making but stood idly by surrounded continually by a crowd who used every means to show how friendly they felt and how welcome we were, while a few of the best house builders set about erecting for us the house in which we were to live as long as we cared to stay with them. When it had been finished, and furnished with the skins, lamp and the other things that go to make a snow-house the coziest and most comfortable of camps, they told us they hoped we would occupy it at least till the last piece of meat in their storehouses had been eaten, and that no more as we stayed in the village to make a snow-hunt seal or do any work until his children began to complain of hunger.

It was to be a holiday, they said, for this was the first time their people had been visited by strangers from so great a distance that they knew nothing of the land from which they came.

Saw a Match for the First Time.

These simple, well bred and hospitable people were the savages whom we had come so far to find. That evening they saw for the first time the lighting of a sulphur match; the next day I showed them the greater marvel of my rifle; it was a day later still that they first understood that I was one of the white men of whom they had heard from other tribes, under the name of Kablunat.

I asked them: "Couldn't you tell by my blue eyes and the color of my hair?"

"But we didn't know," they answered, "what sort of complexion the Kablunat have. Besides, our next neighbors north have eyes and beards like yours."

That was how they first told us of the people whose discovery has brought up such important biological and historical problems—the people who have become known since to newspaper readers as the "Blond Eskimo."

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(To be continued in next Sunday's SUN.)